

NATIONAL MONTFORD POINT MARINE ASSOCIATION
50TH ANNUAL NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Remarks by Administrator Bolden

August 15, 2015

As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you President Averhart.

It's always like a homecoming to be able to join all of you. It was one of the great honors of my life to have been able to serve as National Public Affairs Officer of the Montford Point Marine Association – *I'd confess that I served in the 1970s, but I don't want to admit that I'm that old!*

Looking around this room, there's nothing quite like being able to join so many heroes and more importantly so many friends. I can honestly say that there isn't anywhere else I'd rather be tonight than here with you, marking 50 important years ... remembering our brothers and sisters who have passed ... connecting with friends new and old ... and looking hopefully toward the future.

I think I speak for all of us when I saw that being a Montford Point Marine is a part of who we are. It's something we feel in our very bones. It's about more than simply being in an Association; it's about being part of a family. It's about more than carrying a membership card; it's about carrying on a legacy.

“TRAVELING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOSE THAT COME BEFORE”

One of the greatest of the great American gospel hymns opens with the words, and I quote: *“We are all traveling in the footsteps of those who've gone before, but we'll all be reunited on a new and sunlit shore.”* You likely know the next line, which sings: *“When the Saints go Marching In ...”*

All of us – every single one of us – are traveling in the footsteps of those who came before.

We are traveling in the footsteps of 20,000 African-American Marines who trained at Montford Point in the forties and at least 13,000 who served their country in World War II.

We are traveling in the footsteps of those who continued to step forward and serve, even as the laws of our country were designed to hold them back ...

They who volunteered for the front lines of combat, while our brothers and sisters were sent to the back of the bus.

Even as their rights were denied, they said “semper fi.”

They who were willing to lay down their lives for the country they love, while their brothers and sisters were told they couldn't sit down at a lunch counter.

Even as their rights were denied, they said "semper fi."

They who stood up to serve at the very same time racist politicians stood in front of schoolhouses and colleges.

Even as their rights were denied, they said "semper fi."

They who remained "Always Faithful" – *Semper Fidelis* – as the very houses of their faith were burned to ground As their brothers and sisters faced the fire hose and oftentimes much, much worse.

Even as their rights were denied, they said "semper fi."

LEGACY

This is the 50-year legacy we're here to celebrate today.

I know my story is not unique when I tell you that I dreamed all my life of serving my country, but when it came time to apply to Annapolis, the Members of Congress in my home state of South Carolina let it be known that I shouldn't even bother trying. Today, after a 34-year career in the United States Marine Corps, I have the honor of serving as Administrator of NASA under the first Black President of the United States!

Just recently, I was telling this story to a remarkable and inspiring group of young people. They are called "*Mandela Fellows*" – young leaders from Africa who were chosen to participate in fellowships in Washington in the hope that it will help prepare them for civic leadership in their home countries in Africa.

At the mere mention of the President's name, they broke into spontaneous applause. A few days earlier they had actually addressed them in person. Think about that for a moment. Here were young adults from Africa, participating in a fellowship named after the founding father of a free and Democratic South Africa, being invited to Washington to hear from an African-American President of the United States. Yet at the very same time, if any of them happened to pick up a copy of the Washington Post or turn on the news, they would have seen story after story about how far a ways we still have to go.

Racially motivated shootings... Major economic disparities... the demagoging of immigrants.

A half century ago, Bobby Kennedy went to South Africa and remarked that a Black American was training to be one of the world's first astronauts in times when Black folks didn't even have basic civil and human rights.

Fifty years later, we've made strides, but we are nowhere near the finish line.

I heard a statistic the other day that in 2013 there were eleven states in American (11!) where not a single Black student took the AP Computer Science exam. That's more than a fifth of all states and, by the way, there were eight states where no Latino students took the exam, and two states where no female students took it – zero.

And yet, as the great Langston Hughes wrote, *"I continue to dream."* I know you do too.

The emphasis this Association puts on education could not be more important. We know that the only way to keep the wheels of progress turning is by passing the baton to a new generation of leaders.

One of the favorite parts of my job is that I have the opportunity to meet with young folks all the time and my advice to them is always the same: *"Work hard, study hard and don't be afraid of failure."*

The fact of the matter is, they are going to see some amazing things in their lifetimes. Many of us never thought we'd ever see the day when we had an African-American president.

Our kids and grandkids will not only see the day when human beings set foot on Mars – and I can tell you that there is a consensus emerging around NASA's plan and timetable for sending astronauts to the Red Planet in the 2030s – but they'll see the day when we use Mars as a stepping stone into the rest of the universe.

I often call this generation the "space generation." Every child born less than 15 years ago has lived every day of her or his life in a world where astronauts from many nations have been flying together in space every second of every single day aboard the International Space Station. Their kids and grandkids will likely take for granted that human beings are living and working on Mars, every single day. Think of that.

CONCLUSION

As I wrap up, I just wanted to say that my career in the United States Marines Corps opened vistas of which I could have never dreamed possible when I was attending the segregated schools of Columbia, South Carolina ... when I was just trying to live up to the high ideals of my parents to get a good education and to pursue my dreams.

While I was determined to serve my country, I had no idea I would end up in the Marine Corps as an aviator, or fly in space, or be the head of NASA. But that is the beauty of America. We are still the only place on Earth where our dreams can take us to Mars, and to places we have not yet even imagined.

This is only true because of you and countless other foot soldiers for freedom throughout our history who insisted that this nation live up to its promise of liberty and justice for all.

It is only true, because even as your rights were denied, you said *“Semper Fi.”*

In the epilogue to *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison wrote that, and I quote:

“America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It’s ‘winner take nothing’ that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one and yet many — This is not prophecy, but description.”

Perhaps the greatest gift of our service in the United States Marine Corps is this gift of becoming “one, yet many.”

I am honored to be a part of this Montford Point Marine family – this family of “one, yet many” and humbled to walk the tremendous footsteps of those Marines who came before.

My fellow Marines: God bless you, God bless our Corps and God Bless the Great United States of America! *Semper Fidelis!*